

Sūrah Kawthar

Central Theme

In the previous Sūrah Mā'ūn, the previous *sūrah* it is explained to the leaders of the Quraysh that they had totally disregarded the purpose for which Abraham (sws) had settled his children in the whereabouts of the Baytullāh, and for which he had prayed to the Almighty to bless them with peace and sustenance. It is also pointed out that the Baytullāh had been built for the worship of the One and Alone Allah and to safeguard the rights of the poor and the orphans, but the people who were at that time in charge of it were showing utter disregard to its objectives. Obviously, this mention is directed at the false claim of the Quraysh, which they proudly cherished that being the custodians of the Baytullāh they would be given special treatment by the Almighty and no one would depose them. However, in the previous *sūrah* they were only presented a charge sheet of all their misdeeds; the punishment which they deserved had not been stated. It is in this *sūrah* that their fate is separately depicted. The Prophet (sws) is addressed directly and given the glad tidings that the Baytullāh has been taken away from these unscrupulous people and consigned to his custody; he should therefore solely pray for the Almighty and offer sacrifice for Him only and light the candle of monotheism in the Baytullāh. A warning has also been sounded to the disbelievers that after being dislodged from the Baytullāh they will also be deprived of all the favours they enjoyed on account of it and that finally they will be uprooted from the land. The Almighty shall now shower these favours on those who will assume its responsibility and fulfil its rights. They are the ones who, after rising to political ascendancy in the land will befittingly fulfil the objectives for which it was built.

This *sūrah*, as is indicated above, gives glad tidings to the Prophet (sws). The particle of stress **إِنَّا** (We indeed) and the use of the past tense in **أَعْطَيْنَاكَ** (We have bestowed to you) is to express the certainty of the promise. There are many examples of the use of this linguistic device in the Qur'ān. Whatever has been decided by the Almighty is ultimate and no one can alter it. Therefore, even if these decisions pertain to the future, they are mentioned in the past tense to express the certainty of their occurrence particularly when some good news about the future is to be conveyed.

At the end of the Makkan period, when the oppressive attitude of the disbelievers was reaching its peak, many verses were revealed at various times in which the Prophet (sws) and the Muslims were addressed and given glad tidings of victory and domination. This *sūrah* is one example. However, precisely because of this prediction, many commentators including my teacher Imam Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī hold that it was revealed during the truce of Hudaibiyyah. But in my humble opinion, the *sūrah* was revealed just before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. The glad tidings of a grand victory have been given in many *sūrahs* of the pre-migration period to the Muslims to comfort and assure them, as can be seen in the last Makkan *Sūrahs* of each group; needless to cite any example.

The Quraysh, right from the beginning, very well knew that their real point of difference with the Prophet (sws) was the question that who among them was following the creed of Abraham (sws). As a natural corollary of this difference, they maintained that only those who are the heirs to Abraham's true creed have the right to be the custodians of the Baytullāh. Their arrogance in this regard had reached such an extent that they could not even tolerate the Prophet (sws) and his Companions praying in the Baytullāh. On the other hand, the Muslims through the Prophet's mission and the message he was propagating were well aware that the Quraysh's hold on the Baytullāh was against all principles and to liberate the Baytullāh from their hold was the real purpose of the Prophet's mission.

The two parties also knew that whoever would be dissociated from the Baytullāh would be left all by itself in Arabia and would have no place to go. Therefore, to comfort and solace the Prophet (sws) and the Muslims at the time of the migration to Madīnah, it was necessary to convey to them that they would definitely displace the Quraysh from the Baytullāh and take over its guardianship; that the tussle which was going on with the Quraysh would culminate in their success and that the Prophet of Allah would not be extirpated from the land as the Quraysh contended; rather the enemies of the Prophet (sws) are the ones who would totally be humbled. In fact, it was the glad tidings about His Divine Help in the future which made the grim and exacting task of migration an easy undertaking for the Muslims and which otherwise, as every one knows, was an extremely difficult affair.

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ (١) فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ (٢) إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ (٣)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

Upon you have We bestowed Kawthar, so pray only for your Lord and offer sacrifice only for Him. Indeed, it is your enemy who shall be severed.

Explanation

¹ إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ (١)

كَوْثَرٌ is the intensive form of كَثُرَ which means “wealth and affluence”. Therefore, كَوْثَرٌ would mean “a lot of abundance” or “somebody having a lot abundance and affluence”. It is a noun and is used as an adjective also.

According to linguistic principles, the word كَوْثَرٌ can have the following three meanings:

1. As a word which, in the course of its usage, has been transformed into a noun specifying something named by the Almighty as كَوْثَرٌ.

2. It could be considered as an adjective of a qualified noun which has been suppressed because, as an adjective, it specifies a particular noun so clearly that only its mention brings to mind the noun it qualifies, or there exists a definite indication of this noun from within the context. For example, it is said رَجَالٌ مَرْدٌ عَلَى جُرْدٍ which is actually رَجَالٌ مَرْدٌ عَلَى حَيْلٍ جُرْدٍ (young men on purely bred horses). Similarly, consider the first verse of Sūrah Dhāriyāt: وَالرَّيَّاحُ الدَّارِيَّاتِ دَرَوَا which is actually وَالرَّيَّاحُ الدَّارِيَّاتِ دَرَوَا (By the winds who scatter dust).

3. It can be regarded as a simple adjective having the general meaning it connotes. In such a case, everything having immense good can be considered as its connotation. Although, because of certain clear indications, it could imply definite objects.

Consider next, the meanings of the word attributed to it by our worthy commentators of the past. Ibn Jarīr has mentioned three of them:

(i) كَوْثَرٌ is a water channel in heaven. This is the opinion of ‘Ā’ishah (rta), Ibn ‘Abbās (rta), Ibn Umar (rta), Anas (rta), Mujāhid and Abu# al-‘Āliyah.

(ii) كَوْثَرٌ means immense good. This is held by Ibn ‘Abbās (rta), Sa’īd ibn Jubayr (rta), ‘Ikramah, Qatādah and Mujāhid.

(iii) كَوْثَرٌ is a pond in heaven. This view is maintained by ‘Aṭā.

There is not much difference between the first and third meanings cited above. The pond may be of the water channel mentioned foremost. Only two possibilities now remain: either to regard it as a word which denotes a specific thing, for example “a pond of paradise” or “a water channel in heaven”, or to regard it as connoting everything which has unbounded good in it.

My mentor Imam Farāhī has aptly related the two meanings with each other making them the same. By taking into consideration the context of the *sūrah* in the Qur’ān as well as certain inherent testimonies, he opines that كَوْنٌ means the Baytullāh, which due to various reasons is a treasure of immense good and is a symbol of the pond of paradise in this world. This pond shall be given to the Prophet (sws) in the next.

Imam Farāhī’s arguments can be seen from the following extract from his exegesis:²

It has been stated in the previous sections that our worthy commentators of the past do not differ on the fact that كَوْنٌ means a pond of paradise. In fact, they have even gone on to include in the meaning all possible things that can come within the sphere of “immense good”, keeping in view the general meaning of the word and the past tense of the verse in which it occurs. This would render a diversity in its meaning and make it stand for something that actually possesses the attribute implicitly in its name. Precisely for this reason, the later commentators, consider research in its meaning perfectly allowable.³ If it were some sort of an innovation they would never have indulged in it nor would the early commentators have differed in it. Therefore, if I interpret the word in a sense which unifies “the كَوْنٌ of the heaven” and “the كَوْنٌ of this world”, I would not differ from these commentators just as they do not actually differ from one another in its interpretation. The only difference would be that they have generalized its meaning by including the water channel or the fountain of paradise as well as everything which can be termed as “immense good” like the Qur’ān, wisdom, Islam, and prophethood in its connotations, which actually have no similarity with the water channel or the pond of paradise. I would only include those things in “the كَوْنٌ of this world” which are similar in appearance to a water channel or a pond, whose reality and spiritual aspects were revealed to the Prophet (sws) during the holy ascension.

2. Farāhī, *Majmū‘ah-i tafāsīr*, 418.

3. This refers to the interpretation of Imām Rāzī and that of some others which Imam Farāhī has cited in his exegesis.

After this introduction, Imam Farāhī elaborates on the points which support his deduction. He says:⁴

(1) It is an acknowledged fact that there is a natural desire and inclination in our souls to seek the Almighty. Without this, the human soul cannot receive comfort and assurance. It is this very aspect of human nature which is the cause of various religions Consider then what else can be a better symbol for this natural yearning and eagerness than thirst? In the Psalms of David (sws), this symbolic expression is repeatedly used. If this is correct, then think about the devotees who gather round the Baytullāh during the days of *hajj*, overwhelmed with the feelings of fondness and desire. Don't they seem like people who have an intense craving for thirst and have assembled around a pond to satisfy this longing? If this similarity is evident, then, it would mean that the Baytullāh actually stands for them as the pond of كَوْتَر where they will gather on the Day of Judgement.

(2) The Prophet (sws) has compared our mosques to water channels. According to the Ṣaḥīḥ of Bukhārī:

أَرَأَيْتُمْ لَوْ أَنَّ نَهْرًا بِبَابِ أَحَدِكُمْ يَغْتَسِلُ فِيهِ كُلُّ يَوْمٍ خَمْسًا

Consider if someone among you has a water channel at his door in which he has a bath five times everyday; will he remain dirty?⁵

The basic constituent of this parable also, is water. It not only quenches our thirst but also cleanses us spiritually as well as physically. It is well known that the Baytullāh is the fountainhead of all our prayers. On this basis, our mosques are indeed like the water canals of this pond, through which we cleanse ourselves spiritually.

(3) Just as the congregation of *hajj* depicts the abundance of the Muslim *ummah* in relation to people of other religions, likewise, their assembly at the pond of كَوْتَر also will stand for their multitude, as is evident from certain Aḥādīth. The best possible way in which this great number could have been depicted was to hold their congregation at a specific place. By this gathering, other nations of the world estimate that what is present at the Baytullāh is only a meagre yet vibrant drop of the boundless expanse of water spread all

4. Farāhī, *Majmū'ah-i tafāsīr*, 419-420.

5. Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 1, 197, (no. 505).

over the earth. So just as the gathering of the Muslim *ummah* at the pond of **كَوْثَر** will depict their abundance in relation to the people of other prophets, likewise their assembly at the Baytullah during *hajj* portrays their abundance. Consider how aptly the word **كَوْثَر** relates the two congregations.

(4) The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said that he would recognise his people at the pond of **كَوْثَر** through the traces of water by which they performed ablutions. It is an allusion to the fact that only those who pay visit to the Baytullāh with a pure and sincere heart would be present in the next world around his pond, which is actually the reality of this House.

(5) The Almighty made the conquest of Makkah the cause for the increase in magnitude of the Muslim *ummah*; therefore, after the Prophet's *hajj* people accepted faith in large numbers.

(6) Like, the fountain of **كَوْثَر**, the Almighty has also called the Baytullāh a blessed place. The Qur'ān says:

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِي بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعَالَمِينَ (٣: ٩٦)

Indeed, the first house ever built for men in which they could worship was that at Bakkah, a blessed place, a beacon for the nations. (3:96)

I have just briefly referred to Imam Farāhī's views. For details, a study of his exegesis is necessary. He goes on to explain that the channel of **كَوْثَر** is the true essence and spiritual reality of the Baytullāh and its surroundings. He writes:⁶

If anyone reflects on the features and characteristics of the channel of **كَوْثَر** which was shown to the Prophet (sws) during the holy ascension, he will become aware of the fact that the channel of **كَوْثَر** is the spiritual manifestation of the Baytullāh and its surrounding atmosphere. The common element in the various Ahādīth which describe **كَوْثَر** is that it is a water channel on whose sides are built palaces of hollow pearls. Its floor is of topazes, corals and rubies. The utensils in it are like stars of the heavens, its water is whiter than milk, sweeter than honey and cooler than ice. Its mud is more fragrant than musk. Birds whose necks are like those of the animals

6. Ibid., 421-422.

of sacrifice descend on it.

As we move further in his exegesis, Imam Farāhī, invites us to contemplate on these observations and explains the similarity between the two “Ponds of كَوْتَر”. He says:⁷

Stop for a moment and think of the fact when from all over the world caravans of devotees and zealots gather around this blessed House to quench their fondness for the Almighty? Elated spiritually, do not the pebbles of this holy valley seem more magnificent than rubies and emeralds, its mud more fragrant than musk and the tents of the pilgrims around it more beautiful than domes of pearls? Then just take a look at the pilgrims and at the lines of the camels which are to be sacrificed. Are these not the swarms of the long necked birds near the fountain?

It is evident from these details that the Baytullāh is a figurative manifestation of the pond of كَوْتَر. The Baytullāh will be granted to the believers in heaven in the form of the pond of كَوْتَر – believers who offered its pilgrimage in the desire to reach this blessed pond. Since, at the time of revelation of the sūrah the situation was not clear, only a reference has been made. The real purpose was to give glad tidings to the Prophet (sws) that though his enemies are trying to dislodge him from the Baytullāh, the Almighty has decided to grant this House to him, which not only will be a source of immense good for him in this world but will also be a surety for the pond of كَوْتَر in the next.

فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ⁸

The verse states that the grant of the Almighty mentioned in the previous verse is subject to a condition. Every right imposes an obligation and it only remains in force if this obligation is fulfilled. It has already been indicated before that the Almighty had consigned the Baytullāh to the Quraysh imposing a lot of responsibilities on them. Among them prayer and *infāq* (which is a specific form of sacrifice) occupy special importance. But the Quraysh had distorted and disfigured both of them. They had corrupted sacrifice by associating other deities with Allah and offering sacrifice for them as well. So here, where the Prophet (sws) is declared as the new guardian of the Baytullāh, a reference has also been made to the two responsibilities his predecessors

7. Ibid. 422.

8. So pray only for your Almighty

had grossly failed to carry out and because of which they had actually been ousted from its guardianship.

The word نَحْر (nahr) has been used in the verse which signifies camel sacrifice. However, its general connotation includes the sacrifice of other animals as well. Here this particular word has been specifically used to point out that camel sacrifice was regarded very highly among the followers of Abraham's creed, which the Jews, due to their innovations had pronounced as forbidden. Some people regard نَحْر to imply the holding of hands at one's chest during the prayer. However, the context, which is a major factor in deciding the meaning of a word having various connotations, does not at all support this view. Prayer and sacrifice are aptly mentioned here because the word كَوْنُر is figuratively used for the Baytullāh.

At most places in the Qur'ān, zakāh or infāq are mentioned adjacent to ṣalāh (the prayer), but in this verse sacrifice is grouped with ṣalāh. The reason obviously is that just like that of ṣalāh, the Baytullāh is also the centre of sacrifice. A special aspect of this sacrifice is that not only the poor and needy but the pilgrims as well are provided with food. In other words, besides fulfilling other spiritual objectives, this sacrifice is also a form of infāq.

إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ⁹

This verse is an answer to the jeering predictions of the Quraysh chiefs about the Prophet's future. After giving him the glad tidings of being blessed with the كَوْنُر of the two worlds and after stating the responsibilities these privileges impose, the Almighty has reassured the Prophet (sws) about the bright future of his message in this world as well as his success in the Hereafter. The Qur'ān says that the Prophet's enemies themselves shall be uprooted from the land – something they intended to do with the Prophet (sws) and his companions. شَانِي means "enemy" while أَبْتَر implies a person who is lost to posterity after death and leaves behind no one to even take his name.

The Quraysh were opposing and obstructing the Prophet's mission with all their might in Makkah, but in its whereabouts, particularly, Madīnah this mission was gaining momentum and spreading rapidly. The Quraysh chiefs, quite naturally, felt that their masses would be influenced by this swift penetration and might seriously believe in the severe warnings sounded by the Qur'ān to the leaders of the Quraysh, particularly the Baytullāh's custodians. They feared that this might shatter their public's confidence in their leadership; their sympathies

9. Indeed, your enemy shall be severed.

might tilt in the Prophet's favour and not only strengthen his mission but also make them accept him as their new leader. In order to avert this situation, they began predicting a disappointing and bleak future for the Prophet (sws) so that their people would not be awed by the fact that the Islamic movement was gaining force day by day. They made up different stories in his regard. Seeing the inclinations of the Anṣār towards him, they propagated in the masses the view that owing to his new religion this person has been detached from his nation and the centre of his old religion (the Baytullāh), and that if he now takes refuge in Madīnah with the Anṣār, cutting off himself from the Quraysh, he would be like a severed branch of a tree which is bound to wither away. In the time before the *hijrah*, it was generally held by the people of Arabia that if the Prophet (sws) would leave Makkah and his people, he would go to the Anṣār, because only they were in a position to help and support him. On this very pretext, the Quraysh had even warned certain tribes of the Anṣār, who had come to Makkah to pledge their allegiance, that their oath would definitely entail war with the whole world. But these threats had had no effect on the Anṣār and their devotion and respect for Islam and the Prophet (sws) only augmented day by day. Seeing this state of affairs, the Quraysh were left with no hope of success in the propaganda they had started – but then what else could they do except sowing seeds of dissension. Both, before and after the migration, they tried to dupe their public that it would prove disastrous for the Prophet (sws) and his mission would fade away. However, it was the prediction of the Qur'ān which ultimately came true and the enemies of the Prophet (sws) were totally routed. He reaped the blessings of the كَوْنٌ of this world, and he will certainly be the foremost to reach the كَوْنٌ of heaven to behold the abundance of his *ummah*.
